

Mendoza looking to add a historic Heisman Trophy win for Indiana to his college ride

BY MICHAEL MAROT
ASSOCIATED PRESS

The first time Fernando Mendoza put his hands on a Heisman Trophy, he did it as a whim on a recruiting trip to Yale.

On Saturday, he'll be on stage for the real deal.

Mendoza enters this weekend having won the Associated Press Player of the Year Award and as the favorite to win college football's most prestigious individual award. He would be the first winner from Indiana University and the third with Hispanic roots — titles not lost on the once lightly recruited Miami native who started contemplating this storybook ending a few months ago.

"At the beginning of the year, I saw the list of the top 10 Heisman contenders and evidently (my name) wasn't there," he said. "I was like, 'Wow, I want to make a goal for myself.' I prayed about, like, if I could make it to the ceremony, how cool that would be. Now that it's come to fruition, I'm able to share that moment with people who appreciate it. It's such a cool moment."

For Mendoza, his first and likely only season in Bloomington has been filled with memories.

As fans watched him throw winning touchdown passes late in games against Iowa, Oregon and Penn State what he did behind the scenes — forcing bonds with new teammates, embracing family time and savoring all those special celebrations — helped deliver program-changing victories like Saturday's 13-10 victory over No. 1 Ohio State that gave Indiana its first Big Ten title since 1967, a 13-0 mark and the No. 1 seed in the College Football Playoff.



AJ Mast/AP photo

Indiana's Fernando Mendoza celebrates after the Big Ten championship NCAA college football game against Ohio State in Indianapolis, Saturday, Dec. 6.

Along the way, Mendoza cherished his time studying film with his younger brother, Alberto, meeting with coaches and hearing students serenade him with chants of "HeisMendoza."

The funny thing is Fernando Mendoza never sought the spotlight. He just wanted to win.

"He's just the ultimate professional and a wonderful teammate," starting center Pat Coogan said. "He prepares like no one I've ever seen. He works his butt off like no one I've ever seen. He's just an awesome locker room guy on top of that."

HEAD OF THE CLASS

When Mendoza entered the transfer portal last winter, he could have gone essentially anywhere. He chose Indiana because he knew coach Curt Cignetti would push him hard to improve.

Mendoza knew of Cignetti's

reputation for developing quarterbacks.

At North Carolina State, Cignetti worked with Pro Football Hall of Fame semifinalist Philip Rivers and helped recruit Super Bowl champ Russell Wilson. Then as Cignetti guided the most successful transition from the Football Championship Subdivision to the Football Bowl Subdivision he helped three quarterbacks win conference player of the year awards in five seasons.

Last year, his first at Indiana, Cignetti brought in 2023 Mid-American Conference Player of the Year Kurtis Rourke, who led the Hoosiers to a school record 11 victories and their first playoff bid while earning second-team all-Big Ten honors. Rourke finished ninth in the Heisman voting.

When Cignetti did his homework on Mendoza, he saw something different from the late-bloomer.

"Being the film junkie I am, and making all the different cutups, occasionally I'd see plays from Fernando at Cal," Cignetti said. "When he went in the portal, obviously we watched a lot of game tape on him and just really liked his stuff — the quick release, the arm, the mobility. He's a great person. He really prepares. He's really smart, and he's developed quite a bit since he's been here."

Mendoza's mobility might not have been as evident in 2024 when he was sacked 41 times.

But Cignetti embraced taking a two-year starter from a Power Four school with a rich tradition of producing quarterbacks. He was impressed by Mendoza's crafty work ethic, selfless leadership style and his inspirational journey from grandson of Cuban immigrants to one of America's best college quarterbacks all while watching his mother battle multiple sclerosis.

The adversity has helped Mendoza maintain a positive approach with the kind of real-life perspective rarely found in a 22-year-old with the spotlight shining so brightly on him.

"I've been lucky enough to have such a great team that I've always been in a good position to win games," Mendoza said. "That's what's helped elevate me to the position I'll be in Saturday night."

HEISMENDOZA

It didn't take Mendoza long to win the hearts of Hoosiers fans, who have waited decades to cheer a legitimate Heisman contender.

The last time was 2001 when quarterback Antwaan Randle El finished sixth in the voting. The best finish by an Indiana player was 1989 when running back Anthony Thompson finished second.

But Mendoza didn't impress immediately. His breakout game came in Week 4, a rout over then-No. 8 Illinois when he threw five TD passes for the second straight week. Suddenly, to his surprise, friends began touting him as a Heisman contender.

One week later, at Iowa, he beat a blitz to find Elijah Sarratt for a 49-yard touchdown with 88 seconds to go. But the play that showed his teammates what Mendoza was all about came when he took a big hit on a run out of bounds that ignited a sideline shoving match.

"I told him we had his back. I said 'Go out there and just sling it, we have all the confidence in the world in you,'" linebacker Aiden Fisher said. "That dude's got some confidence, too. He's got some swagger. He looked at me and said, 'I got us. don't even worry about it.'"

He showed his resilience again at No. 3 Oregon with a tiebreaking 8-yard TD pass to Sarratt after throwing the Pick-6 that tied the score at 20. He did it again in the final minute at Penn State and again in the third quarter against the Buckeyes, putting him here on the cusp of hoisting his own Heisman Trophy.

"The (other finalists) are fantastic players. I think everybody, when you're a finalist, you've got to prepare a speech because anything could happen," Mendoza said before discussing the Heisman being a goal. "I thought of it, but it was a little bit more of a dream and a long-range goal or a goal you reach a little farther than you think you could reach."

It could be right in his hands Saturday night.

FBS Teams Rethink Bowl Games After 12-Team Playoff

BY MAURA CAREY
ASSOCIATED PRESS

The quest to fill all 35 bowl games outside the playoff expanded to teams with losing records this year, but the searching didn't get much easier. At least 10 teams reportedly declined invitations, raising questions about the future of the postseason games that are one of college football's most cherished traditions whose role has dramatically changed.

Notre Dame, Iowa State and Kansas State were the first to decide against bowl trips, with the two Big 12 teams drawing \$500,000 fines for throwing a wrench into the league's commitment to certain games. After Notre Dame was left out of the College Football Playoff bracket, the Fighting Irish rejected an appearance in the Pop-Tarts Bowl.

In the second year of the 12-team playoff, some bowls — even established ones with long histories — are being reduced to optional status. The chance to hold more practices, get away to a warmer locale, give fans the chance to book a holiday trip with a little more football alongside fellow alumni doesn't seem to hold the same appeal for every program.

Bowl organizers say there is no need to panic and note the sprawling schedule of bowls — they begin Saturday, within an hour of the Army-Navy game that signals the end of the regular season — remains valuable.

"College football needs bowl games as much as it needs



Tyler Tate/AP photo

Kansas State quarterback Avery Johnson, right, hands the ball off to running back Joe Jackson, left, during the first half of an NCAA college football game against Utah, Saturday, Nov. 22 in Salt Lake City.

the CFP," the executive director of Coca-Cola Bowl Season, Nick Carparelli, told The Associated Press. "Bowl season is just as important, and to a greater number of institutions and student-athletes. College football needs postseason opportunities that serve the 130-plus FBS institutions who are all at different points in their development and evolution as football programs."

BOWL VALUE

Bowls were considered prestigious for many years in part because there were so few of them, with the Rose Bowl the only major game in the early 1930s. But the appeal grew. Sunny bowl locations in the early days of winter touted themselves to tourists and all-star-like games gave way to showdowns between top programs. By 1980, there were more than a dozen bowl games and there were 35 by 2010, with sponsors

getting their names on them to help foot the bill. TV deals meant wall-to-wall bowl games for three weeks.

Recent changes in college athletics have lessened the value for some. Quarterback Beau Pribula drew outsized attention a year ago when he left playoff-bound Penn State for the transfer portal. This year, Ole Miss balked at letting coach Lane Kiffin stay for the the CFP after he took the job at LSU.

Players deciding they don't want to do a bowl game doesn't surprise Ramogi Huma, the executive director of the National College Players Association.

"I don't think you can hold players to a standard where they should absolutely be playing every bowl game offered when you have examples of schools and coaches not doing that," Huma said this week.

Huma argued the lack of enthusiasm toward bowl



Matthew Putney/AP photo

Iowa State defensive back David Coffey (18) celebrates breaking up a pass in the end zone with defensive back's Drew Surges (29) and Carson Van Dinter (36) during the first half of an NCAA college football game against Kansas, Saturday, Nov. 22 in Ames, Iowa.

games goes hand-in-hand with a 12-team playoff. With room in the playoff for eight additional teams, the mission becomes CFP-or-bust for top programs.

"The emergence of a wider and larger College Football Playoff is another factor when you look at it," Huma said. "If the gold standard for these teams is now making an expanded playoff and everything else falls short, that may be a deterrent for a team like Notre Dame. ... They might not want to play in another bowl, and that alone could decrease, kind of water down, the prominence of the bowls that are outside the playoff."

The classics, like the Cotton

Bowl, Orange Bowl, Rose Bowl, Sugar Bowl, Fiesta Bowl and Peach Bowl, still hold significant meaning as College Football Playoff games. But in a case like the Birmingham Bowl, it took a handful of rejections before finding an opponent for Georgia Southern.

Carparelli doesn't think it's time to sound an alarm.

"There are 82 bowl-eligible teams this year," he said. "Twelve were selected to participate in the playoff, and the other 70 were invited to participate in a bowl game. We shouldn't take a position on a system based on three of those 70 deciding it was not in their best interest to participate."

He says interest in bowl games is at an all-time high. Last year, the 35 non-CFP bowl games averaged 2.7 million television viewers, marking a 14% year-over-year increase and the largest audience in five years — and that was in the first year of the 12-team playoff.

The vice president of ESPN Events, Clint Overby, echoed that optimism.

"Locally, there continues to be no shortage of communities who want to host games, sponsorships remain solid, viewership in the sport remains at an all-time high with last year's bowl season being an increase over previous years," Overby said. "There is no doubt the sport is in transition, but it would be shortsighted to judge this year's non-CFP postseason through the emotional lens of what transpired this past Sunday."

He acknowledged that stability doesn't mean standing still.

"The sport continues to evolve as a result of the CFP," he said. "It would be hard to suggest that the bowl system should remain static. I'm of the belief that the bowl system should be proactive and work with its league partners to meet them where the sport is going to ensure the long-term viability of the bowl system as a part of the college football postseason."

Michigan Scrambles for Coach After Moore Firing

BY LARRY LAGE
ASSOCIATED PRESS

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Michigan has quite a mess on its hands.

The storied football program is yet again reeling from scandal, this time with once-promising coach Sherrone Moore at the center of it.

Moore spent Wednesday night in jail after being fired earlier in the day for what the school said was an inappropriate relationship with a staff member. His ensuing arrest was related to an assault investigation, for which Moore



David Dermer/AP photo

Michigan acting head coach Sherrone Moore reacts to a video replay during the first half of an NCAA college football game against Ohio State, Saturday, Nov. 25, 2023, in Ann Arbor, Mich.

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